AN

ESSAY

ON THE

FOLLOWING SUBJECT:

"WHEN THE FULNESS OF THE TIME WAS COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON." GALATIANS, iv. 4.

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2. — "JESUS CHRIST considered as an EXAMPLE to MANKIND."
3. — "The NECESSITY of a REDEEMER."
4. — "The REWARDS of ETERNITY."
5. — "The ADVANTAGES of the KNOWLEDGE revealed to MANKIND, concerning the HOLY SPIRIT."
6. — "VOLUNTARY NEGLECT of any ONE DUTY cannot be compensated by STRICTNESS of ATTENTION to OTHER DUTIES."

TO

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

EDWARD LORD THURLOW,

LORD HIGH CHANCELLOR OF GREAT BRITAIN,

THIS ESSAY,

BY HIS LORDSHIP's PERMISSION,

IS INSCRIBED,

WITH SENTIMENTS OF UNFEIGNED GRATITUDE,

BY HIS LORDSHIP's MOST OBLIGED SERVANT,

JOSEPH WHITELEY.

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ON THE

FOLLOWING SUBJECT;

"WHEN THE FULNESS OF THE TIME WAS COME, GOD SENT FORTH HIS SON." GALATIANS, iv. 4.

WE are accuſtomed to ſpeak of the Attributes of God, according to the manner in which they appear to us. If we partake of his bounty, while we are conſcious of having nothing to recommend us to his favour, we admire his Goodneſs. If we diſcern the reaſons of his Providence, and the fitneſs with which the means he employs are adapted to their reſpective ends, we acknowledge his Wiſdom. If the motives of his proceedings are too remote from our apprehenſions to be aſſigned with any degree of certainty, we reſolve his appointments into the determination of his Will.

Should it be ſaid that God is the Sovereign of the Univerſe; that, generally, we had no claim upon his Goodneſs, but from his own voluntary promiſe; and, with particular reference to the ſubject of this Eſſay, that He had a right to diſpenſe the Goſpel of his Son, at whatever period he thought proper; ſuch poſitions, however true, would not ſatisfy this age of diſquiſition and enquiry. They might ſatisfy the Chriſtian, but would not eaſily convince the Scoffer.

In order to confirm the faith of the one, and to obviate the objections of the other, we will endeavour to prove, in the courſe of this Eſſay, that the Time, in which it pleaſed God to beſtow upon us the bleſſing of his Son, was not ſelected without deſign; that it was contrived and fitted to produce the greateſt poſſible advantages to mankind; and, of courſe, that it was ſo far from being an arbitrary exerciſe of Sovereignty, that we are capable of perceiving in it unequivocal marks both of Wiſdom and Goodneſs.

As it is the firſt buſineſs of Natural Religion to inſtruct mankind in the Exiſtence and the Moral Government of the Deity; ſo it was the primary object of Chriſtianity, to eſtabliſh its divine authority on a ſecure foundation; without which, its advantages would in vain have been publiſhed to an incredulous world.

And it was neceſſary that the Evidence of the Chriſtian Revelation ſhould, not only remove every reaſonable cauſe of doubt from thoſe to whom it was immediately promulged, but alſo, that it ſhould appear ſatisfactory to a long ſucceſſion of men. That period muſt therefore be allowed to have been determined by the councils of God, which was peculiarly calculated to extend its credibility to preceding, as well as to future ages, and to produce its effect, in men of every poſſible diverſity of ſituation and character, from the beginning, to the end, of time.

Such

Such we preſume to have been the period, when the Son of God appeared in the world. His miſſion was accompanied with ſuch Facts, as extorted from his enemies the reluctant, but unqualified, acknowledgment of divine interpoſition. It was preceded by a chain of Predictions, which rendered him the object of Faith before his appearance; and which demonſtrated, by their circumſtantial accompliſhment, a direct communication with the Spirit of God: And it has produced, in men of honeſt and enlightened minds, a conviction which ſeems to grow, rather than to diminiſh, by the lapſe of ages.

Had the publication of the Goſpel been poſtponed to a later period, it might have been aſked with triumph, Why was the Advent of the Meſſiah deferred ſo long? If the benefits of his Miſſion are ſo great as they are repreſented, why were they withheld from preceding generations, and confined to the latter ages of the world? This queſtion ſhall be canvaſſed on the moſt material ground; and, we truſt, will be decided by ſuch reaſons, as will remove every doubt from an unprejudiced mind.

The Prophecies relating to Chriſt are eaſily diſtinguiſhable into two kinds. Such as, of themſelves, ſingly, are evidences of more than human foreſight; and ſuch as, in connection with others, form a ſyſtem of predictions, which, while they reflect light on each other, diſcover themſelves to be derived from the Fountain of light and knowledge.

It is the union of thoſe Predictions which are ſingly and ſeparately ſtriking, with ſuch as are connected and interwoven, which renders the argument from Prophecy complete. If the evidence of either were diminiſhed, while the other remained entire, the proof would be ſo far

imperfect. Now, on ſuppoſition that Chriſt had appeared at a more early period, admitting, for a moment, that the more ſtriking prophecies would have retained their full force, it muſt be allowed, that the chain of proofs would have been ſhortened, the connection interrupted, and the force diminiſhed. The Time and Place of the Meſſiah's appearance, his Character and Family, his Offices, and the Purpoſe of his Miſſion, could not have been aſcertained beforehand with ſuch evident marks of diſcrimination; nor could they have produced the ſame confidence they now afford, when each prediction is conſidered as inſerted into that which precedes, and connected with that which follows, though delivered by men, remote from each other in ſituation and time, and marked by every diverſity of attainment and purſuit.

But, is it true, on this ſuppoſition, that the credit of the moſt illuſtrious predictions would not have been injured? The more the time of their accompliſhment was accelerated, would there not have been the more reaſon to ſuſpect that they involved ſome fraud, artifice, or colluſion? And would not this have furniſhed to the Unbeliever a pretence for affirming, with Porphyry, that the prophecy was occaſioned by the event, rather than that the event was the fulfilment of the prophecy? Or, admitting that the priority of the prediction to the event could be aſcertained beyond diſpute, would there not have remained a general apprehenſion, that the event might have been inferred, and even computed, from the ſtate and circumſtances of mankind.

Thus, one of the greateſt Arguments, on which our beſt Hopes depend, would have been weakened in all its parts; and, in men of incredulous minds, its evidence would have been wholly invalidated. It would have ſeemed to reſt on the ſame foundation with the Oracles of ſuperſtition, and would have produced no ſtronger conviction than the anſwers of Memphis and Delphi, or the predictions of the Libyan and the Dodonæan Jove.

Miracles

Miracles may be diſtinguiſhed in the ſame manner as Prophecies. Beſides Effects, between which and human cauſes no relation can be traced, and which are therefore, ſeparately, proofs of divine interpoſition, inſtances might be adduced of ſuch, as, when combined, and taken collectively, exhibit a ſcheme of Providence deſigned for a particular purpoſe. Such, for example, was the Jewiſh Theocracy: Which, though ſupported by a ſucceſſion of facts, as ſplendid as ever were exhibited on the theatre of the world, did not preſerve that ſingular people from frequent relapſes into Idolatry. A proof, as deciſive as any can be, that the moſt ſtriking cauſes do not produce their full effect, unleſs in minds prepared to receive the impreſſion, by habits of attention and judgment, ſuch as could not be formed in the earlieſt ages of the world.

In theſe ages, mankind in general were credulous, becauſe they were unexperienced. They could not always diſtinguiſh a pretended, from a genuine, Miracle. They were not prepared to examine the nature of evidence, and to eſtimate the degrees of probability. They ſuſpected no intention to deceive, and, of courſe, were liable to be miſled by appearance. Now, had the Miracles of Chriſt been performed at any period of this deſcription, admitting that they would have rouſed the untutored world to a due ſenſe of their importance, is it probable that they would have been tranſmitted to us unimpaired, and unmixed with fable? Is it not more likely, that in paſſing through the medium of dark ages, they would either have been wholly intercepted; or, at beſt, that they would have appeared in our eyes, at this diſtance, like the prodigies of Greece and Rome? They were therefore wiſely deferred, until Science had illumined the minds of men, and Experience had rendered them cautious and inquiſitive: Till they could, not only aſſign to every Fact its due degree of Credibility, but alſo reaſon on its Importance, record it for general Uſe, and tranſmit it, with every neceſſary Atteſtation, to the examination of poſterity.

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On the firſt publication of Chriſtianity, men of all deſcriptions ſeemed averſe to it. Beſides a general corruption of Morals among the Jews, they prided themſelves in their civil and religious diſtinctions. And, as they were the depoſitaries and the guardians of the ſacred Oracles, they admitted, with reluctance, the truth of a Religion, which aboliſhed their modes of worſhip, changed their habits of life, deſtroyed their expectations of emancipation and conqueſt, and diſallowed their imaginary elevation above the reſt of mankind. Of courſe, had the Miracles of Chriſt been leſs public or leſs ſtupendous, had they been performed in a more ignorant, or a more accommodating age, the Jews would not have wanted the inclination boldly to advance the charge of Impoſture. Inſtead of this, they were compelled to acknowledge the reality of his Miracles; and, though ſome, through perverſeneſs and obſtinacy, aſcribed them to the agency of evil Spirits, in this very evaſion, they, tacitly at leaſt, admitted, that the adequate cauſe of ſuch aſtoniſhing effects could not be found in any human power.

Nor were the proofs of Chriſtianity examined with greater candour by the Heathen World. They were ſubmitted to men attached to the ſuperſtitions, and the vices, of their fathers;—ſuperſtitions which were protected by the plenitude of power, and vices which were ſanctioned by the example of the Gods. Yet theſe proofs were ſo illuſtrious and ſo forcible, their exiſtence ſo well authenticated, and their claim ſo irreſiſtible, that they ſilenced the moſt able of the pagan Unbelievers. And when Celſus in the ſecond, Porphyry in the third, and the Emperor Julian in the fourth century, attempted to invalidate their evidence, they were obliged, either to have recourſe to the ſuppoſition of Magic, or to contraſt the Miracles of Chriſt with thoſe aſcribed to Abaris, Pythagoras, Apollonius, Ariſteas, and Proconneſius.

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The Evidence of Chriſtianity has gained no ſmall acceſſion of ſtrength, from the teſtimony of contemporary Writers. And therefore, the time of its publication was wiſely deferred, in order that ſucceeding generations might receive a confirmation of their Faith, from the atteſtation of men, who, at beſt, were indifferent ſpectators; and who, in general, were inclined, from the joint motives of intereſt and pride, to oppoſe and to perſecute, rather than to favour, the Religion of Chriſt.

At the preſent day, when Infidelity has changed both the mode, and the ground, of attack; when the imputation of Magic, and of the agency of Demons, is acknowledged to be the charge of diſconcerted oppoſition; when, not the Tendency, but the Reality, and even the Poſſibility of Miracles, is affected to be called in queſtion; the narratives of the contemporary Hiſtorian are of ſingular weight, becauſe they are the conceſſions of an enemy. But, while we admit their force, in its full extent, let them not be haſtily overvalued. If we aſſent to the relations of a Seneca and an elder Pliny, ſo far as the facts they mention are concerned, let not their ſilence, or their omiſſion of an extraordinary event, be aſſumed as a proof that no ſuch event happened. Every reaſonable man muſt allow, that any hiſtorical Fact may be preſumed to have been deſignedly omitted, when probable reaſons may be aſſigned for the omiſſion. Let us conſider, on this ground, for a moment, the preternatural Darkneſs at the Crucifixion: And, if ſatisfactory reaſons can be produced, why no mention is to be found of this phænomenon, in the Authors above-mentioned, let the objection be diſmiſſed for ever.

It is a curious fact, that the Darkneſs, on which Seneca profeſſes to treat, is confined to that of Eclipſes which happened in the uſual courſe of Nature. He gives merely a detail of that interception of light, which had ariſen, at ſtated and regular periods, from the revolutions of the

the Sun and Moon: And therefore, it would have been highly improper and impertinent, to have introduced an Event, which, however analogous in its appearance, was to be referred to a different, and an unknown, cauſe. But, granting, for the ſake of argument, that the Hiſtorian would have betrayed no want of Taſte, or of Judgment, in recording an event which was foreign to his purpoſe; it is well known that all the Philoſophers of that age courted the favour of the Emperor. They ſtyled him the Patron of Learning, and the Father of his People; and, in their turn, were flattered with his careſſes. They not only ſtudied his Humour, but even anticipated his Wiſhes: And, as the Emperor was avowedly a Perſecutor of the Chriſtians, they would have acted contrary to every principle of human nature, had they mentioned any circumſtance, which might have advanced, though ever ſo remotely, the credit of the Goſpel.

But, the Darkneſs in queſtion is not deſtitute of proper Teſtimony. Tertullian affirms that it was recorded in the public Regiſters. Phlegon deſcribes it circumſtantially: He ſtyles it an eclipſe of the Sun, ſo total as to render the Stars viſible: And all the early Advocates of Chriſtianity appeal to it, as a Fact undeniably and univerſally acknowledged. And if, after ſuch Appeal, the Philoſophers were ſilent, it is unanſwerably certain that they were compelled to acquieſce in the truth of an event, which, if falſe, they would eaſily have detected and gladly have expoſed.

The atteſtation of Heathen Writers to the cauſe of Chriſtianity is not, generally, of that negative kind, which ariſes from ſilent acquieſcence. It is, for the moſt part, direct, poſitive, and deciſive. It may ſeem almoſt ſuperfluous to add, that, beſides the univerſal acknowledgment of the Life, the Miracles, and the Crucifixion, of Chriſt, the Star which conducted the Eaſtern Sages to Bethlehem is mentioned by Chalcidius: The Maſſacre of the young children at Bethlehem, and

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the remark of Auguſtus on its being extended to the Son of Herod, are diſtinctly related by Macrobius: The divine Honours paid to Chriſt; the Firmneſs, with which his followers refuſed to blaſpheme him; the celebration of Hymns in their religious aſſemblies; and the Oath, by which they bound themſelves to abſtain from Sin, are ſeverally related by the younger Pliny.

Should it be ſaid that all theſe authors adhered to the Religion of their Fathers, let it not be forgotten that the Apologies of Quadratus and Ariſtides, though that of the latter is no longer extant, are inſtances of the victory of the Chriſtian, over the Heathen, Faith. And if it be urged, that the converts from the Pagan, to the Chriſtian, Religion were men of no reputation, let it be anſwered, that, as long as the names of Joſeph, of Dionyſius, and of Clemens are remembered, ſo long it will be recollected, that they were, reſpectively, members of the Jewiſh, the Athenian, and the Roman, Senate.

The literary Character of the times when the Miracles of Chriſt were recorded, affords a complete anſwer to the Objection, which is urged, at this day, againſt the Identity of the Goſpel Records:—An objection founded in the nature of Teſtimony, which, in paſſing through a ſucceſſion of hands, is imagined to loſe ſomething, in point of Credibility, at each remove; by being expoſed alternately to the extravagance of Credulity, the miſtakes of Ignorance, and the interpolations of Fraud.

Without examining how far the general credit of Hiſtory may be injured, by the defects inherent in the nature of Teſtimony, it may be diſtinctly ſhewn that theſe defects have been counteracted, by circumſtances peculiar to the Evangelical Hiſtory. For, beſides the advantage it poſſeſſes, in common with the moſt valuable memorials of profane

Hiſtory, of being written by men who were themſelves Spectators, or who were circumſtantially informed by living Witneſſes, of the Facts they atteſt, its Identity was ſecured, beyond the reach of Impoſture, by a conſtant Recital in public worſhip, by an immediate Tranſlation into different languages, and by a Tranſcription, as unexampled in the Integrity, as in the Number, of its copies. The collation of ancient Manuſcripts, their exact Agreement in eſſential matters, the Quotations made from them by the firſt Chriſtian Writers, the examination of verbal Inaccuracies, and the early detection of ſpurious Readings, afford a modern and a growing proof, that the New Teſtament, now in uſe, is an authentic Record of thoſe very Facts, to which the Saviour of the World appealed as credentials of his Divine Miſſion.

Beſides theſe advantages, in point of Evidence, the Time of Chriſt's appearance was more favourable than any preceding period to the Propagation of his religion. The Roman arms had ſubdued, and civilized, a conſiderable portion of the earth. They had introduced the rudiments of ſcience and the love of knowledge. They had diffuſed a common Language over the conquered provinces; and, what is more to our purpoſe, they had opened an eaſy Communication and a ready Intercourſe, among nations before unknown to each other, from the banks of the Euphrates to the ſhores of the Atlantic, and from the Nile to the Iſles of Britain. Accordingly, we find at Jeruſalem men of every language under heaven. We ſee the ſame Apoſtles, almoſt at the ſame moment, in the leſſer Aſia, in Greece, in Italy, and in Spain. We diſcover infant Churches every where riſing into importance: And we behold Chriſtianity, ſoon after it was planted in the Heart, rapidly ſpreading to the Extremities, of the Roman Empire.

It is not unworthy of remark, that the Goſpel was wiſely withheld, until men could be ſenſible of its value and importance; until they had tried the force, and explored the extent, of human Reaſon; and until they were conſcious, that the powers of Philoſophy had been completely exhauſted, in the ſearch, not of the Conſolations, but of the firſt Principles, of Religion.

Whatever reaſon the latter ages of the world have to rejoice, that the Son of God was not ſent, until the Fulneſs of the Time was come, a few reflections will evince that former ages had no reaſon to complain. If they were not ſo well acquainted with the Purpoſe and the Efficacy of his Miſſion, they had, at leaſt, every Information which was ſuitable to their circumſtances and capacities.

The ſtate of the world bears a ſtriking reſemblance to the condition of human Life. It has its Infancy, its Maturity, and its old Age: And it advances, by ſlow and progreſſive ſteps, through the ſeveral gradations of Knowledge and Experience. And, as we admire the Wiſdom of God, in withholding from the human Mind the advantages of Science, until diſcipline has unfolded, and time has matured, its powers: So we muſt acknowledge the Goodneſs of Providence, in not revealing the Goſpel in its perfection, until mankind were prepared, by a ſeries of previous Communications, to enter into its Views, and to underſtand its Deſign.

The firſt mention of it was made, immediately after the tranſgreſſion of our firſt parents; and, in conjunction with the appointment of ſacrifice, ſerved to excite in their minds ſome idea of the Demerit of Sin, and of the Mercy of God. And, in order to preſerve a ſenſe of the divine Placability, the Deity was pleaſed to addreſs himſelf familiarly to

men; to chear them with his preſence; to inſtruct them in the ways of his Providence; and to eſtabliſh, by his own immediate appointment, the Hour, the Place, and the Manner of Worſhip. Adam was a living Monument, and the Garden of Eden a laſting Admonition, of the danger of Sin. The lengthened period of human life gave a force and certainty to Tradition, which rendered the tranſactions of the earlieſt times familiar to ſucceeding generations. And, as Lamech was contemporary both with Adam and with Noah, every communication from Heaven, reſpecting the Recovery of mankind, might be conveyed entire, beyond the times of the Deluge.

After this awful event, Tradition began to be corrupted: And, in five generations, the doctrine of the Divine Unity would have been completely ſuperſeded by the worſhip of all the Hoſt of Heaven, had not God interpoſed, to prevent the eſtabliſhment of Polytheiſm, by a confuſion of Language, and a ſeparation of Reſidence. And when he was pleaſed to ſelect a peculiar People, to be the guardians of divine Truth and of rational Worſhip, he never wholly withdrew his preſence from the reſt of mankind. He ſtill addreſſed them by his Servants, or by men who were furniſhed with ſupernatural means of inſtruction. And, though every nation could not boaſt of a Melchiſedech, a Job, or an Abimelech, the inſtance of Balaam may convince us, that the Deity diſplayed ſome manifeſtation of his Nature and Attributes, even to men who had forfeited all claim to his favour.

The Reſidence of the Iſraelites among the Egyptians was of ſingular uſe, in ſpreading the knowledge of the true God. The Egyptians, at that time, enjoyed the reputation of ſuperior Wiſdom. They were viſited by the Sages of diſtant countries, who, from motives of vanity, ambition, or patriotiſm, aimed at diſtinction above their fellow-citizens.

And

And an acquaintance with their manners, their religion, and their laws, was eſteemed an accompliſhment equally uſeful to the Philoſopher and the Lawgiver.

The conſequence of this intercourſe was the diffuſion of religious knowledge. The Worſhip of the Iſraelites, which, from its Novelty and Singularity, had attracted the Attention, ſeemed, by its Purity, to deſerve the Reſpect, of the world. And it was owing to the perverſeneſs of human Nature, rather than to the want of better information, that the God of Iſrael, who had diſplayed, in preſence of the Egyptians, unequivocal proofs of Majeſty and Supremacy, inſtead of being honoured with the excluſive worſhip, was only numbered among the Deities, of the ſurrounding nations.

The poſitive Inſtitutions, which were ſuperadded to the obſervance of the Moral Law, were ſo interwoven with the concerns of life, that they appeared to conſtitute at once the Religion, and the Buſineſs, of the people. Theſe appointments ſerved a double purpoſe. They proved an excellent preſervative againſt Idolatry, and they tended to prepare mankind for that more perfect diſpenſation, which was to be the accompliſhment, the Subſtance, and the Conſummation of the Law.

The attachment of the Jews to their own Religion, and their invincible conſtancy in refuſing to join in any of the rites of ſuperſtition, ſerved to enlighten the minds of the ſurrounding nations. Their zeal in making Proſelytes was exerted, with every advantage, in the ſeaſon of proſperity and conqueſt; and, in the hour of captivity, their inflexible adherence to the God of their Fathers commanded univerſal attention and admiration: While the viſible interference of the Deity, in the protection of his people, extorted from their oppreſſors the confeſſion,

that

that the God of Iſrael, as he was unrivalled in Power, ought to be the ſupreme, if not the only, object of Adoration.

Wherever the Jews were diſperſed, the principles of true Religion were diſſeminated. Their Prophets were honoured, and their Laws revered, throughout the four great Monarchies, which poſſeſſed, in ſucceſſion, the dominion of the earth. Their Scriptures were tranſlated into Greek, which was then the univerſal Language: And their Prophecies were ſo well, and ſo generally, underſtood, that, according to the expreſs declarations of Tacitus and Suetonius, an illuſtrious Perſonage was expected, by all the Eaſtern Nations, to appear in Judea, about the time of the Advent of Chriſt.

The Deſcription of this exalted Character became gradually clearer and more diſtinct, in all the Prophets, from Moſes to Malachi. The attributes of regal Power and univerſal Dominion, which were generally aſcribed to him by the Jews, were adopted by the Heathen. And if we ſee the judgment of Joſephus ſo far perverted, as to apply, with baſe adulation, the predictions concerning the Meſſiah, to the perſon of Veſpaſian; we cannot be ſurprized, that, in the opinion of Cicero, the Sibylline Oracles ſhould find their accompliſhment in Ptolemy; that they ſhould be applied to Julius, and afterwards to Auguſtus, Cæſar; that they ſhould be appropriated by Tacitus to Veſpaſian and Titus, and by Virgil to the infant Son of Pollio.

The Ages of Ignorance and of Fable had now elapſed. The revolutions of Government had begun to acquire ſtability, and even immortality, in the page of the Hiſtorian. Science and Commerce were extended from the Capital, to the diſtant Cities of the Empire. A common language had blended, almoſt into one people, the ſeveral

nations

nations who were compriſed under the ſame government. Judea had aſſumed the appellation of a Roman Province. A peace, as univerſal as it was unuſual, had prepared the world for reflection: And general Expectation was on the watch to deſcry, and to announce, the appearance of the Meſſiah.

At length, when the Fulneſs of the Time was come, the Sun of Righteouſneſs roſe to illumine the earth. Till then, he ſeemed to take a ſtationary Poſition over the land of Judea: And, while he diſpenſed his collected rays over that favoured land, his beams were more faintly ſcattered, and more thinly diſperſed, in proportion as they receded from that central ſituation. But he is no longer ſtationary. Like the natural Sun, he viſits, in ſucceſſion, the ſeveral diſtricts of the Earth. And, if his light is not yet equally diffuſed; if, as yet, he has hardly appeared upon the Horizon of ſome countries; we truſt he will ſoon diſpel the Darkneſs which now overſpreads them, and *ſhine more and more unto the perfect Day*.

THE END.

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